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Brackett, Isabelle (Belle)
interviewed by Angela Riedel and Vivian
Andrist on February 5, 1981, Eastham, MA

Eastham Historical Society-Oral Histories

1 audiocassette (ca. 90 min.) + transcript

Eastham (MA) Town Government--1930's-60's
Eastham (MA) Town Clerk

Interview with Isabelle Brackett
in Eastham, Massachusetts

Interview #1
by Angela Riedel
and Vivian Andrist
February 5, 1981

Q: This is an interview with Belle Brackett, as part of the Eastham Historical Society's Oral History Project. The interviewers are Vivian Andrist and Angela Riedel. It is taking place in Belle's home on Nauset Road, Eastham, February 4, 1981, at 10:00 a.m.

Belle, tell us about when you were born, who your parents were.

Belle Brackett: I was born in Staten Island, New York. My father worked for the French Cable Company as a cable operator, and there being a new cable office built in Orleans, he was chosen to come here to work in Orleans.

Consequently, when I was between two and a half and three we moved to the Cape from New York. So I feel like a Cape Codder, but actually I'm not, because you really have to be born and brought up here to be a Cape Codder.

Q: Excuse me, Belle, what was the date? Did we get your date of birth?

Belle Brackett: My date of birth was October 6th, 1903, and we

moved here in 1905. And my girlhood was spent in Orleans and I went to school there.

My father's parents were Scottish people. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland and he ran away from home when he was eighteen and came to America and became employed through the French Cable Company.

Q: And what was his full name?

Belle: His name was James Dickey. My mother was born in Rockport, Mass. on Cape Ann. Her parents were Nova Scotian people, and my mother and her sister, so my grandmother told me, were reputedly the prettiest girls in Rockport. My father met her there, because he was employed in Rockport temporarily with the cable station there. From Rockport he went to New York, and at the age of three we moved to the Cape, and we've lived here ever since.

Q: And your mother's name was-- ?

Belle: My mother's name was Bessie Rowell, and she is a descendant of John Rowell, who fought in the Revolutionary War. So my mother's family goes back historically to the Revolution. Her birthplace-- the house that she was born in is designated in Rockport as a historical landmark. It's the old Rowell house on Pigeon Hill.

Q: Now why did they call you your name? Have you any story about it?

Belle: I'm told that I was named for both my grandmothers. My

grandmother on my mother's side, her name was Leah. My grandmother on my father's side was named Isabella, for the Queen of Spain. So my name is Leah Isabella.

Q: Your father did not keep up with his ancestors, his people in Scotland, then?

Belle: His father was a chemist in Glasgow, and I'm sorry that we didn't delve into the family history more. His brother was killed in Africa, we know this, hunting lions. Uncle Thomas. And I can remember as a girl how upset the family was when we got that word from Scotland, that his brother had been killed while hunting on a safari. But other than that I am not too acquainted with the people on my father's side.

We always looked forward in the summertime to visiting Rockport and my grandmother and my cousins and my aunts and uncles. It was just a glorious time, as I look back on it. And somehow, those early days, as I look back, seem to be some of the happiest of my lifetime.

Q: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Belle: I have one brother older than me and a sister younger. My brother became employed with the French Cable Company and consequently was sent to Aruba-- the Dutch--

Q: And what was his name?

Belle: His name was Elliott Dickey. James Elliott Dickey. Named

for my father. And he stayed in Aruba until he retired and then came back here. He married a Dutch girl, the daughter of the Governor of the island down there. And he had one son, Jimmy.

My sister married a fellow from Orleans, and they lived in Orleans for a while. Then went to Aruba and were employed in Aruba, returning to the States when they retired.

Q: And her name?

Belle: And her name was Bessie.

Q: After your mother?

Belle: After my mother, yes.

Q: As you think about growing up in Orleans and your parents, what would be the first part of your life?

Belle: When I think of growing up in Orleans and comparing it to Orleans as it is today, it was just a little country town. No hardtop roads. We had bicycles and we just rode everywhere on the bicycle. There was one grocery store and one bakery store and a dry goods store and a drug store. And this is where we all did our business. Going out of town to shop, people just didn't do that. You shopped at home.

Q: Did you ever come to Eastham in those days?

Belle: Not until I was in high school. No, Eastham was a long way off. But then in high school, I met my then-to-be husband

and I came to Eastham every time I could have an excuse to get down here. We used to have to come on our bikes, of course, and it was a long ride then. But Eastham people were someone that we really didn't know too much about then.

Q: Did you think of Eastham as being more country than Orleans?

Belle: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, it was. And yet Orleans was countrified too. But we just thought of Eastham as some little strange place.

(LAUGHTER)

Q: I was wondering, just what did you do as you grew up? What were the big highlights of your year?

Belle: There are so many organizations now for young people to get involved in, but when I was growing up the Camp Fire Girls was organized, ^{and} that seemed to be the only group that girls could be involved in and I did join the Camp Fire Girls, and we had a wonderful leader, and taught us an entirely different way of living. The Camp Fire Girls are outdoor people, and it was the beginning of a new social life, because we'd have meetings, and girls that we really didn't have too much in common with belonged to this group and you just got so you knew everybody and had more of an affinity with them. And I've often thought of Miss Clancy, her name was, and how much she inspired us and helped us to grow up and do things that we wouldn't have done had it not been for this association there.

Q: What kinds of things?

Belle: Well, for instance, we would have to-- in order to get a certain honor, they called it, you'd have to be able to bake a loaf of bread, or you'd have to be able to do some preserving. You'd have to sew. You'd have to hike so far. You'd have to understand different signs in the woods. You'd have to be able to prove that were you out all night, you could take care of yourself. Things that we wouldn't have been exposed to were it not for this Camp Fire Girl group.

Q: Did you camp on the beach more often than not?

Belle: Yes, we did camp on the beach, although we would camp in the woods. And one year we raised money enough so that we hired a cottage over in Harwichport for two weeks, and we just had such a wonderful time over there. Harwichport at that time was a long way off. But she had connections, so that she could have the arrangement made for us to have the use of this cottage, and we just had a wonderful time.

My mother and father were both musically inclined, and my mother insisted that we all take lessons on the piano. She sang and she played the mandolin. My father would be in all the minstrel shows. He had a wonderful bass voice. So consequently music was a part of my life growing up.

Q: You have a piano here right now, so it still is.

Belle: Yes. My mother had a big old Iverson Pond piano. She had a mandolin, a guitar, all these instruments. My brother could play

any instrument without any lessons. He had a wonderful ear. They insisted that I take piano lessons, because I would sit and play with one finger things that I had heard. My music teacher came over on the train from Harwich, and I presume she was younger than I am now, but as a little girl she looked like an old, old lady. Abby Doane was her name. And I hated the lessons, and when I knew she was coming, my father would have to come looking for me. It shows how small the town was then. I'm sure he wouldn't know where to find me now in Orleans, but in those days he would come looking for me. Where I would be-- I would just be somewhere else.

And I remember she had this long baton, and I would learn the melody with my right hand, but I would make up the bass, and she had this baton hitting me on the back of my hands, because I wasn't playing it right.

Well, it didn't work out, because I couldn't be bothered playing the music the way it was written, and in those days the popular music was just beginning to be the fad. There was a new piece coming out every week, and I think maybe I got inspired when I went to Rockport one summer with my mother when I was in high school. My cousin played the piano and it was a big thing during the summer to go to Gloucester on the trolley car, and what she went for mostly was to get a new sheet of music. We paid ten cents for it.

So I copied her. Consequently came home with all this music, which I never read. But she got me interested in playing the piano. So I just played my way through high school. Loved it. There was always a crowd around the piano, and I played the piano all my life

by ear mostly. But there were so few people that could play when I was growing up that everybody-- oh, Belle will play. And I loved playing and played for the fun, and when I think that I became the organist in the Methodist Church-- I just don't know.

Q: Miss Doane would have been proud of you.

Belle: Well, she would have.

(GENERAL LAUGHTER)

Q: Or horrified, as the case may be.

Belle: I often think of her. She just gave up on me. She said to my mother, we just can't do anything with Isabelle.

Q: She would have been proud of you. Did you have a Victrola or anything like that, that you could buy records and play them?

Belle: Yes. We finally got one. My mother's house was next to the hardware store. Smith's Hardware Store. And they had Victrolas for sale, and after school I couldn't wait to get down there, and they had records that you could play to see how they sounded. And for some reason they'd let me go in there and play that Victrola, and I'd sort of be dancing around by myself, just listening to the music, you know.

And then my father bought a Victrola and, of course, the next thing was getting the records for that. So we've always had music in the house.

Q: In the early days of radio, it wouldn't be like the Hit Parade

was, where you heard the popular songs? I suppose you couldn't hear as well?

Belle: Yes. In the early days of my marriage-- and, oh, I remember our first Atwater-Kent radio, and, of course, we loved the music. And my children were then taking lessons on the piano. We always had-- my husband bought me a piano the first year we were married as a Christmas gift, and it's this piano. And it was a second-hand piano, but had not been used very much, and I remember he paid a hundred dollars for it, and at that time it was a lot of money. And during the Depression too. And the piano has followed us wherever we went and we still enjoy it.

Q: I was thinking of the crystal sets, when the first ones came out. I did not know that you could hear the music very well.

Belle: Well, we had ear-phones, as I recall, in the beginning. But it wasn't long before we had this Atwater-Kent and we listened to the Breakfast Serenade and Jack Benny and his programs, and it was just a regular performance. Especially on Sunday nights, not to miss the programs on radio.

Q: But back to your high school days, you were the entertainment, when you would have a get-together in your high school days?

Belle: Oh, yes. Yes. And, of course, in Rockport-- the last summer that I went to Rockport, they were having an outdoor-- well, I guess you'd call it-- not a carnival, but there was a lady who taught ballet and she had announced that she wanted all the young

people to come and take part in this entertainment that they were going to have. It was an outdoor thing and there was going to be a lawn party and all. And she taught us ballet, which nobody on the Cape-- it was one of those things you read about. And so my cousins and I, of course we were interested and we took ballet and had costumes and we loved it.

And the next year, when I came home, for the first time the Camp Fire Girls, which I mentioned before, decided to put on this entertainment to raise money, and Miss Clancy said, can anyone dance? We have a section here for a ballet. And I raised my hand to dance. And I remember I had a red floating dress and I balleted. No lessons. (GENERAL LAUGHTER) It was fun though. Oh, we just had so much fun..

Q: What other things do you remember of your school days, such as going to school?

Belle: Well, I enjoyed school and I breezed through. I didn't work. And when I graduated, there were eleven in our graduating class. It was a big event, of course, in the Town Hall, and I did get a scholarship when I graduated. It was offered by the Universalist Church, of whom Henry Cummings, who owned the dry goods store at that time, and a very wealthy influential man in town, had the-- he was one of the trustees, and through-- I applied for the scholarship and got it. Two thousand dollars. And in those days-- . So I was all set for St. Lawrence University, and I went, and I stayed three weeks. And I came home and I got married. Ran off with my husband-to-be. We got married and that was the end of that.

Q: And that's how you got to Eastham then?

Belle: That's how I got to Eastham, yes. I met my husband in high school. We were very young. We were just-- we couldn't see anything else. We just got married, period. Started to raise a family and that was that.

Q: Where did you first live in Eastham?

Belle: I lived-- let me think now. We lived in the house that used to be called the old Peter Higgins house. *75 Massasoit Rd. 1122*

Q: What road was it on?

Belle: It's on Massassoit Road. You leave Route 6 and it's-- it's all been remodeled now. There's a Higgins living there now, Raymond Higgins lives there now.

Q: Is it the one on the left after you turn off Route 6?

Belle: Yes.

Q: Kind of a half-Cape it used to be, or three-quarters Cape?

Belle: Three-quarters, I think, and it's all been remodeled. *1976* There's a pond down in the back. And one of my children was born in that house. Betty, my oldest daughter, was born at my mother's house in Orleans, and then Phyllis came along and she was born in this house. And Judy and Jay were born both in the hospital. Hospitals weren't heard of in those days.

Q: I was wondering. The hospital was in Hyannis?

Belle: Yes. Cape Cod Hospital. When Judy came along, it was different.

Q: It must have been something to know that you were going to have a baby away from help?

Belle: Well, it's just one of those things you-- well, you get married and these things happen. And all the grandparents-- hoping for a boy, of course, but Betty turned out to be a girl.

Q: How old were you, Belle, when you were married?

Belle: Eighteen.

Q: What was your wedding date?

Belle: May. I think it was in May of '22.

Q: Did you elope or did you have-- ?

Belle: We just ran off and got married.

Q: Where did you run off to?

Belle: Middleborough. My husband had a car. Cars were coming in then and he had a car, so we just got married. Of course, our parents couldn't do anything with us. We just were determined. This was it, and we just got married.

Q: Were you under age? Did you need your parents' consent?

Belle: Yes. Well, that's another thing. We got the license, and the Town Clerk, who was Leslie Chase, he saw my husband's parents, and had to, because my husband was under age too. Oh, it was just a terrible mix-up, you know. But they finally gave in. They gave in, but we did carry out our original plan of getting married.

Q: Do you remember the circumstances? The man who married you?

Belle: He was a minister in Middleborough, and I don't know any particular reason that we went to Middleborough. It's just that we got there and we looked for the minister, and I just remember him as an older man. We had our license, and we got married. So that was that.

Q: And your husband's name was Sam?

Belle: Samuel Brackett.

Q: Can you tell us something about his family? It's quite an old family here in Eastham, isn't it?

Belle: Oh, yes. My son was interested enough to look up the family background of the Bracketts. And he owned the General Store down ⁵⁸⁰ here at North Eastham. He and George Brackett, his half-brother. Well, they just were the place for people here in Eastham to buy everything. I have a picture here, showing George Wiley who worked for them, with the delivery wagon and the horse. And he just went all over town taking orders for everything. Everything. That store was a general store and you could buy anything, from a stick of gum to a ton of hay or coal, or gallons of oil. Just everything.

Q: How long did this store operate? When did it stop?

Belle: Well, I think-- we weathered the Depression in the store. It was a very profitable business. But then that was about the time when the chain store came into Orleans and my father-in-law-- people in those days depended on their asparagus and turnip crop, the shellfish for their livelihood. They would place their order for fertilizer with my father-in-law in the fall, for their turnips and asparagus. When the fertilizer came, they would say, now, when we sell our crop, we will pay the bill, and if the crop didn't sell, the bill was not paid. Maybe a little on account. He used to carry-- they used to call it, I'll carry him through the winter, with groceries and all this. And then when the spring came and they could begin to get an income from fishing or asparagus, then they would pay the bill.

And, of course, that was the old way of doing business, but when the chain stores came and people could buy much cheaper, they would forget that they owed the grocery bill from last year. And there are people in this town today that when my family went out of business were unable to pay the bill.

Q: Sounds like a lot of bookkeeping.

Belle: They didn't hire a bookkeeper. They did their own bookkeeping in those days, and they had one lady in the store waiting on trade. I suppose they must have kept books, but there was never any bookkeeper that I know of in that store, with all the business they did.

Q: And it was the only store?

Belle: Yes. At that time.

Q: Did you work in it?

Belle: No, because I had children and I had to keep house and bring up my family. But as the children got older, maybe four or five years-- when my oldest daughter became four or five years old, my father-in-law did have an asparagus bed and the ladies used to bunch asparagus, and my Aunt Martha worked bunching asparagus, and she used to say, well, I'm going to start bunching grass pretty soon, so I won't be able to do this or that or the other thing. And I said, well, what do you mean, bunch grass? Oh, the asparagus. They had to cut the asparagus and rebunch it and we get paid so much for bunching grass.

So I said, well, maybe I could do that. So I took my children with me and I learned to bunch grass, and I got paid for it.

Q: Was it a very difficult thing to do?

Belle: No, but if you were working with Aunt Martha, you put the little stalks in the middle and you put the big ones around on the outside, so that you'd have a nice looking bunch. And she'd say, those little stalks are just as good as the big ones, but they don't look as good. She was a wonderful person. Wonderful.

And she was a wonderful cook. I didn't know how to cook, but I said, Aunt Martha, will you teach me how to make a cake? She could

make the most beautiful cakes. With a wood stove. No indicator on the oven. She'd put her hand in the oven. That's fine. Then she'd put the cake in. The most beautiful cake. And I said, would you teach me to make a cake? Yes. You come over and spend the day. This used to be what you did. Come over and spend the day. Bring the children and come for dinner and spend the day.

And so I went over and she said, now, you take some butter and you take a little sugar. And I'd say, well, how much? Oh-h-h... just a little. And put a little milk and throw in some flour. She had no idea of how much to do with it. And I never learned to make a cake from Aunt Martha.

Q: Was it Aunt Martha Brackets?

Belle: No, it was Aunt Martha Gill. She was a sister to my husband's mother. And my husband's mother was not a well person. Aunt Martha took over her duties. They had a big house to take care of. And, oh, everything was so immaculate. The lamp chimneys, the kerosene lamps, that was one thing I had to learn to do, to keep my lamp chimneys clean. If you had smoked-up lamp chimneys, you were not a good housekeeper. But hers were shining. And the top of the stove. You could eat off the top of that old black iron stove. I don't know how they did it, honestly.

Q: No one had electricity?

Belle: No. No.

Q: Not even in Orleans?

Belle: No. I had been married some little time before electricity came, and what an exciting time it was when you could pull the chain. And no more lamp chimneys to wash, that was the thing of it.

Q: No wicks to trim?

(GENERAL LAUGHTER)

Belle: No. No. They were great housekeepers, those people. It was a different life for me, to come into a family that-- they were wonderful cooks, they were wonderful housekeepers, and they just knew what they were doing. Everything was spotlessly clean. And it was a different environment for me altogether, because my father, coming from Scotland, had certain things that he liked to eat. For instance, we drank tea all the time. My husband's family drank coffee. I had never tasted coffee until I got married. I was brought up on tea. Black tea. Yellow Label Lipton Tea is what we had.

And my mother was a good cook, but my father didn't go in for fancy cakes and puddings and pies and things like that. So just an entirely different life for me.

Q: Did you feel that you were out in the country when you married and came to Eastham?

Belle: No. I just felt that I was a country girl anyway in Orleans.

Q: Just a different environment?

Belle: And the city was a long way off.

Q: And what was the city?

Belle: Boston. Oh yes, Boston. Gracious, you-- and I was always scared to death, going with my mother to Rockport. We would have to take the train and go to Provincetown, and take the Dorothy Bradford boat and go across the Bay to Boston and get in there with all that traffic, and I thought, I don't think my mother is capable of getting us where we're supposed to go. I was scared to death. But we always made it, and got back home again.

Q: You never went overland, the way we do now?

Belle: No, this was part of the trip for my mother. She loved the boat trip from Provincetown to Rockport. And then we spent the summer in Rockport and came home in time for us to go back to school again. Wonderful life down there. And Rockport was just a country place too at that time. I have this painting of Motif No. 1, which is down on the wharf in Rockport, and it's my uncle's store-- is right back here, and we've got down over that wharf so many times to that old No. 1. Loved it.

Q: You do so well with your paintings.

Belle: I love them. I really do. They'll never hang in a museum.
(LAUGHTER)

Q: I wondered, when we were thinking about Eastham, you married in 1922?

Belle: Yes.

Q: Then this was after World War I?

Belle: Oh, yes.

Q: Do you have any particular memories of the war and what it meant?

Belle: World War I?

Q: Yes.

Belle: Well, I was in high school when the war was going on, and I just remember vaguely Armistice Day. My parents bought the Boston Post and, of course, when we got the news in those days it was a day late. Today we get it immediately. But the paper came and a big headline, ARMISTICE IS SIGNED, and it was just a cause for a celebration. My brother was not in the war and so we had no one involved in it, but, of course, it affected everybody. And my father-- the thing that I remember about World War I is that they sent a contingent of Marines down to guard the Cable Station in Orleans, and they had to patrol back and forth, with their guns over their shoulders, and being sixteen or seventeen, and I had to walk by the Cable Station to go to school, and I'd get up on the sidewalk and look at the Marine, you know. Nice looking young man with a gun, walking back and forth.

And my father was really upset with me about that. He just cautioned me that these are people you don't have anything to do with. They're here, they're working, and he lectured me about it. But it was fun. There were eight or ten of them, and we got so we knew them by name. One was Smith and one was Taylor, and this one

is some, and we got so we knew them all, the girls, you know. And if there was a dance and the Marines were there with their uniforms--

Q: That was a good dance--

Belle: We just had a great time.

Q: What was the location of your school?

Belle: Well, let's see now. The high school and the elementary school were in one building, as I recall. The Legion Hall is now where our school was, and the high school students were upstairs. And you went up these stairs, and they formed a "Y". The girls go this way. The boys go that way. And girls don't go that way and boys don't go that way, they go this way.

And we had Mr. Stewart for our principal. He was there for many years. A wonderful man, and had a great sense of humor and put up with an awful lot from us. But those were happy days.

Q: When you try to think of how Orleans and the whole area changed during World War I, how did it?

Belle: Well, I just don't recall, other than the Armistice being signed and the Marines leaving the Cape. I think that the fact that we had part of the Army here on the Cape guarding this Cable Station, these Marines walking back and forth with their guns, and this made us realize, made the other people in Orleans realize that the Cable Station was an important building in the town.

Q: Worth defending?

Belle: Things going on there. And the cable people were sort of set in a group by themselves by the Cape Codders. There were a lot of French people, because it was the French Cable Company. And because the French people were here in Orleans with their families, then we began to hear, but they go to the Catholic Church. And we didn't have a Catholic Church in our area. And this was new, because the Cape was primarily Protestant in those days. In this area.

But the French were Catholic and they had to go, I think, to Brewster to church. So this was a difference. Although my father was a Protestant, but the French were Catholic people. And they had their own little clique, you know. They all had something in common, because they were cable people. They called us cable people. Different than the Cape Codders, you know.

Q: Was your father-- he was working there at the time you're talking about?

Belle: Yes.

Q: Did he bring home any stories about the Cable Museum that you can remember? Did you talk about it at the dinner table or anything like that?

Belle: Well, it was just-- and if I wanted twenty-five cents or something, I used to trot myself down to the Cable Station and go in the front door and there were all these men working this cable thing, and I got so I knew them all. I can recall conversations at the table, my brother and my father talking about the messages that they were getting, and I'm sure during the war that they were very

important messages coming through the cable line.

But it was just something that I grew up with and didn't realize the importance of it at the time. You see? And looking back, I can really appreciate that they knew what was going on down there. Otherwise, they would never have had the Armed Services there guarding the place. And, of course, the cable came right in the Cove, you know.

But as I recall my growing up, my father was always involved with the Cable Station, and the old cable hut down here at Nauset. That was my contact with Eastham, because my father would have to come down here. If the cable was broken, there would be a ship to come out and work on repair. So my father would have to be in this cable hut to be in contact with this ship. And when he came from Orleans to North Eastham, it was some place way way off. I just had no idea where it was.

So it was quite an interesting life, as I look back on it. When you're growing up, I think you don't really-- it's just part of living and you just go on with it.

Q: You're more interested in your own affairs at that age.

Belle: That's true. And my own personal things and my friends and what I'm doing and so forth.

Q: When your father would be part of the Minstrels, were they in the Academy Playhouse?

Belle: Yes. That was the Town Hall, and they used to have dances

there once a week, and my brother played in the orchestra. He played saxophone at that time. They had a violinist and a drummer and we did the schottische and the two-step, and then gradually-- I remember when we graduated from high school, we hired an orchestra from Fall River!

Q: Good heavens!

(LAUGHTER)

Belle: And, oh, wow! So it was those things. It didn't take much, I guess, to please us in those days. We got excited over things that today you're just very nonchalant about.

Q: Who were some of the people in your class that you can remember and talk about? Did you have other boys or dates, boy friends besides Sam?

Belle: Yes, I did, but he was the one. It's a strange thing that all-- there's one fellow still living that was in my class. His name is Carl Mayo. I don't see Carl very often. The other boys-- Frank Smith and Clarence Quinn, his parents are living. Quinn's Package Store in Orleans. He was one of those.

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

Q: I think that Prohibition must have been an interesting time on the Cape.

Belle: Yes, it was. I don't think it affected us in the beginning, because we were busy and it really didn't mean much to us one way or the other, whether there was Prohibition or not, because in my

immediate family we just had no interest in liquor. It wasn't part of your living the way it is today.

But I do remember that all of a sudden there were certain characters in town that they knew they were rum-runners and they were being watched. And, of course, this was a topic of conversation.

And then there was a big raid. I'll never forget it. It was in the winter time. Probably weather like this. And there was a big raid and they caught up with this ship out in the Bay. They were just about ready to load some booze on the beach down here at Eastham and they got caught and they threw all the liquor overboard. And it got around. So in a couple of days everybody in this town was down on the beach looking for a bottle. Wading out with waders on and coming in with a couple of bottles, you know.

Oh, it was exciting. That's the one thing I remember about Prohibition in this town.

(MUCH
LAUGHTER)

Q: And did everybody go off and drink their own bottle?

Belle: Oh, certainly. And then we did experiment with some grape wine, because the fellow who took care of the dump, old Tony Escabay Portuguese, and he knew how to make Portuguese wine, and he told my husband, he said, you get grapes, we make wine.

So we got grapes and we made wine, and it was delicious. But what a process. They turned the whole house upside down, you know, getting the grapes ready and the sugar, and then you had to put it in containers and it had to sit. And that was quite a big deal too.

That's about the only thing I remember about the Prohibition.

I do remember, when I became involved in Town affairs and we were tallying up votes, one of the questions on the ballot was, every three years, "Do you approve of the use of alcoholic beverages on the premises? Alcoholic beverages off the premises?" This was whether your Town would go "Wet" or "Dry". And for a long time Eastham was the only town on the Cape that voted No on all three questions. We did not want any alcoholic liquors in this town. We had the Christian Endeavour Society and Otto Nickerson was one of the members of this Christian Endeavour Society, and every year when these questions came up, they put on a campaign and you'd get a card, Vote No on Question One, Question Two, Question Three.

But finally, and not too many years ago either, Eastham finally went "Wet", so that we could sell alcohol in the stores, get it in a restaurant. And I forget what the third question was, but there was always three. And that was exciting. We were notorious, because we were the only dry town on the Cape, and a long time.

Q: On the entire Cape?

Belle: Yes. I'm quite sure about that. I'm quite sure that Eastham for a long time was the only dry town. At any rate, it would have been one among two or three, but it runs in my mind that we were the only dry town.

But everybody had to give up. The Christian Endeavour Society, gradually the old people died and Otto lost interest and there was no one to tell you to vote No on Question One, Two and Three. We always got a kick out of that.

Q! Now how did you get involved in Town affairs? When did you first start getting interested?

Belle: Well, my family-- I think I was politically involved growing up. My father was always interested in politics. Who was going to be the President and Vice-President and local affairs. We were Republicans, and so, when I got married, I was a Republican, because my family and my husband's family were Republican.

And I remember going to Town Meeting. Town Meeting used to be an all-day affair, and everybody took their lunch and we just took the day off and Town Meeting day was a big day. And so, of course, I went to Town Meeting, and I remember going-- and the Depression had hit and things were not going well at all and we were beginning to feel the pinch.

And so, anyway, I went to Town Meeting-- I think it was the first one I went to-- and Jennie Sparrow, who was a resident here in Eastham, was the Town Accountant, and I can remember her standing up. She had asked for a raise in pay. They were paying her a hundred dollars a year to be the Town Accountant, and she was asking for fifty dollars more a year. And she said, if I don't get it, I'm going to quit.

Her husband was working for Quincy Shaw, the millionaire who owned the Golf Course, and he was in charge of five men. So while other men were out of work, nothing to do, her husband had this job and people were resentful. And so, why should we pay his wife a hundred and fifty dollars, regardless of the work she was doing, when they were so well off. Anyway, they voted, you know, so Jennie

quit.

And I remember going home and I kept thinking, a hundred dollars. It was a lot of money. And I thought, now she has had no more education than I have, and I thought, if she can do that work, I can do it. Because we needed money.

So I applied for the job and they gave it to me. And I knew nothing about bookkeeping. It had been a poor subject for me in school, because I didn't apply myself really. But at that time the State Auditors were controlling the accounts, so the minute that there was a change in the Treasurer's Office, they were here, to see that the books were the way they should be. They taught me the accountant's work, and they told me they were glad I didn't know bookkeeping. They taught me the state system of bookkeeping and I did what they told me to do.

And so from then on I was involved in town affairs as Town Accountant.

Q: Who appointed you?

Belle: The Selectmen. I had to apply to the Selectmen.

Q: And who were they at the time?

Belle: Ralph Chase and Maurice Wiley and Edward Penniman were the three Selectmen.

Q: And this was what year?

Belle: That would be 19--

Q: If it was during the Depression, that would be after 1930.

Belle: 1930, we were just beginning to come out of the Depression.
I think it was 1937 or '8.

Q: Mr. Roosevelt was President.

Belle: Yes. Yes, it was in the thirties. I should have that date.
But anyway, I became involved in it and liked it. They were awfully
nice to me there. They realized I didn't have the least idea what
I was trying to do, but they were very helpful, and it didn't take me
long to catch on.

And Mr. Chase was the Treasurer and Tax Collector at that time,
Leslie Chase, and he certainly was-- I couldn't have worked for anyone
who was any more considerate than he was. We always got along fine,
and I just enjoyed it. From the very beginning I loved it. And it
was an outlet from the Depression and it was something else to think
about. And to think I was going to get paid a hundred dollars, you
know. That's a lot of money.

Q: How long did you continue as Accountant?

Belle: I continued as Accountant until 1952, and that was the year
that Leslie Chase retired. From Town Accountant-- there's an
article in here telling about my election as Town Treasurer.

They had no woman clerk. The Selectmen were doing all the
clerical work themselves. They had no lady clerk doing any of the
town work, and it was getting to the point where the State was

demanding more detail, and gradually it got around, well, the Selectmen are going to have to have a clerk. And I thought, if I could get the clerk's job and combine it with the accountant's, I'd have a week's pay coming in to help out with the financial troubles at home.

And, oh, I just wanted that job so bad, but the Selectmen, they wouldn't come out and really say, well, we are going to appoint someone to come in and help us. But the time came when they had to, and they gave me the job of being the clerk. I was the clerk to the Board of Welfare, to the Board of Selectmen, to the Board of Assessors, to the Treasurer-Tax Collector. I took private typing lessons, because I had never typed before, and worked nights to learn how to type. I just made up my mind, I wanted that job so bad, I thought, I'm just going to make myself so indispensable around this place, they can't get along without me. I was determined, because I loved the work, you know. I just loved it.

And from then on, I really-- Leslie became sick, the Treasurer, and I had worked there long enough, so that I knew tax collecting, and I just naturally fell into it, you see.

Q: I think you did make yourself indispensable.

Belle: I intended to, believe me, and I was carrying on Leslie's work. Then, of course, they had to hire a social worker to take care of the welfare work, and gradually the office was expanded. And so, when Leslie died I ran for office, his job, and got it, and I have the petition downstairs, where some of the men in town said,

by God, she's going to have that job. Nobody else is going to have it. She's earned it. And I've got the petitions downstairs. They got everyone in town to sign my papers. I must drag that out too. I kept that all these years.

But I kept the job until I retired, and no one ever ran against me. I never had any opposition. But I loved the work and I loved the people and I just loved being involved in all the town affairs that were going on.

Q: What were your duties as Town Clerk mostly?

Belle: Well, as Town Clerk-- and that was becoming more and more demanding. And now it's even more so. In those days, you-- well, you issued marriage licenses and fishing and game licenses. But it was the Treasurer and the Tax Collector and the Town Clerk combination, you had the whole three things to do. And Leslie was very meticulous about his records. He was a beautiful writer. He wrote left-handed and he practically stood on his head to write, but he certainly had a wonderful pen. I used to love his handwriting. Mine wasn't that good.

But from the time I went into work for the Town of Eastham, in looking over some of these records, many many things have happened to change this town. And I remember now that the first big happening was the establishment of the Planning Board and the Zoning Board, where people, if you wanted to sub-divide, if you wanted to sell a little piece of your land, you had to go through the process of getting a sub-division on record and going through